

COMMONWEAL THEATRE



Year in
Review
2017



PROFESSIONAL LIVE THEATRE

2017—Uncommon & Unforgettable

As we look to bring our third decade of professional, live theatre to a close, we thought we might want to share with you the full story of the Commonwealth Theatre Company. Most of you know us from the stories that we put on stage, but the real story of our success comes from YOU—our audience. When we engage with one another at the theatre—as so many of you did after *Steel Magnolias*, telling us how much the emotional center of the story meant to you; as many patrons did asking about how *Ghost-Writer* ended when meeting us on the street; or in the local shops and restaurants where we shared the warmth of the story of Joseph Merrick after *The Elephant Man*, to highlight a few—you inspire our mission to enrich the common good through actor-based storytelling which is both transcendent and relevant.

Rather than swamp you with endless statistics, because we are storytellers we like to share with you stories from all of our various endeavors which we hope will give you a more complete picture of what the Commonwealth is and how our core values of artistic excellence, community, education, diversity, sustainability, and balance inform all that we do. And we hope these stories resonate with you and make you feel as if you are a more deeply bonded and appreciated member of the Commonwealth family. So read on and enjoy!



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hal Cropp".

—Hal Cropp
Executive Director



The 2017 Commonwealth Resident Company.

celebrating

30

years

A Year to Remember

Commonweal commenced its 29th mainstage season by opening Henrik Ibsen's final work, *When We Dead Awaken*. This play is not only Ibsen's last, but also ended Commonweal's annual commitment to hosting an Ibsen Festival. As a special salute to this prolific playwright (and his equally impressive mutton chops), IbsenFest also offered two goofy, larger-than-life performances of *The Last Two Minutes of the Complete Works of Henrik Ibsen* (by Greg Allen of Neofuturists fame). In *When We Dead Awaken*, IbsenFest-goers enjoyed the ardent and intense reunion of a master artist (Hal Cropp) with his long-lost muse (Adrienne Sweeney). In contrast, *The Last Two Minutes* acted out some of Ibsen's most-famous scenes with Barbie dolls and ketchup bottles, among other things (and condiments). All in all, there was a slice of Ibsen for every appetite and it was a smashing way to begin the season.

Next up came *The Elephant Man* by Bernard Pomerance. At face value, some might assume a play about the hideously deformed Victorian "Elephant Man" to be dour and dark. In actuality, Joseph Merrick's story invigorated patrons with its uplifting messages of acceptance, friendship, and the beauty found within even the most beastly among us.

There certainly were several somber moments on stage, but that was definitely not the case behind the scenes. The "office dog," Lucy (owned by Hal Cropp

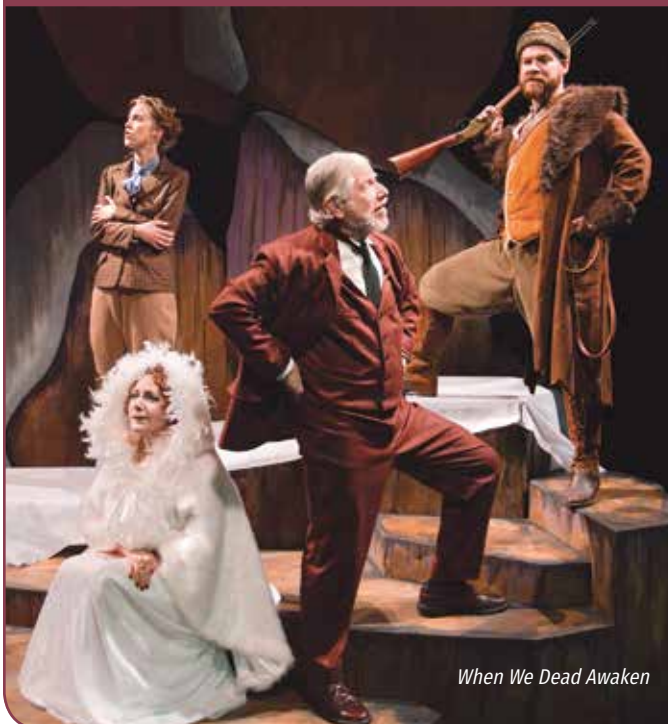


and Adrienne Sweeney), frequently visited actors in the dressing rooms during intermission. Even in their corsets and layered skirts, the ladies of *The Elephant Man* cast still created opportunities to play with their four-legged guest. Resident Ensemble member Abbie Cathcart went a step further and tried to get permission to bring Lucy onstage as a lapdog

to one of the rich ladies she played in the show. But—no dice. Maybe next time, pup.

In June, *Steel Magnolias* joined the fun to fill out the rest of our summer repertory. This Southern classic showcased the spunky wit and tenacity of six women in "Truvy's Beauty Salon." For this process, Commonweal had the pleasure of welcoming Twin Cities actors Betti Battocletti and Jane Hammill to play Clairee and Ouiser, respectively. It was delightful getting to know these ladies and discovering the ways in which their onstage characters resemble their personalities in life. Like Clairee, Betti is wonderfully sweet, smart and sassy. Jane is similar to Ouiser in that she loves her friends fiercely and is funnier than she knows. Though different in style

Farewell to IbsenFest



When We Dead Awaken

As 2017 marked the ending of our annual commitment to the Ibsen Festival, we thought it only fitting to take a short trip down memory lane, and to remark on some of our favorite IbsenFest moments over the years.

Including 2017, Commonweal hosted an Ibsen Festival for almost 20 years. In our first year, we opened *Hedda Gabler*, "featuring cigars and port wine with Judge Brack" (Hal Cropp). Favorite IbsenFest memories include the time when there was a huge snowstorm in town, and the Norwegian Consulate closed the Pub and had to be driven to his hotel. Another year, Commonweal had a blast hosting an amazing fashion show, featuring costumes built for a decade of Ibsen plays. Notable guests included playwright and screenwriter Jeffrey Hatcher, as well as Ba Clementsen, the National Theater of Norway's Ibsen Festival Coordinator. From Aquavit tastings to political caricatures, Norwegian fruit soup to goofy spin-offs of Ibsen's plays, the Ibsen Festivals have been fun, enlightening openings to Commonweal's mainstage season.

and aesthetic, *Steel Magnolias* and *The Elephant Man* were both based on real individuals whose time on Earth was cut short, and who were survived by strong, beautiful friends. They complemented each other and made for a thought-provoking, lovely summer of shows.



Ghost-Writer, written by Michael Hollinger, held the fourth slot of our five-show mainstage season. In this three-person drama we gleaned the deep, professional bond Myra had with her late employer, Mr. Franklin Woolsey. The veritable third wheel of this almost-love story would appear to be Vivian Woolsey, Mr. Woolsey's widowed wife. Seasonal actor Susan d'Autremont flew in from Colorado to play the part. From the very beginning, Susan made it clear she intended to infuse Mrs. Woolsey with more insight and personal empowerment than normally ascribed to women of that time period. Instead of merely viewing Myra as a threat to her marriage, she sought to gain a deeper understanding of her. In the current climate, where women are encouraged more and more to lift each other up rather than tear each other down, it felt invigorating and apt to see this portrayal on our stage.

Capping off Commonweal's 29th season was *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*, a quirky sequel to Dickens'



Rewarding Apprenticeships

The Commonweal Theatre Company offers exciting, demanding and rewarding apprenticeships intended to help young theatre artists transition into the professional world. For approximately 11 months, each apprentice is immersed in the workings of our producing, professional theatre company. Apprentices are cast in mainstage productions and are assigned designing, assistant directing and/or stage managing duties. Administratively, apprentices work alongside company members on the Marketing, Development, and Production teams.

Commonweal's apprenticeship culminates in a capstone production, where they use the skills they learned over the year to design, produce and perform their own show. With this rare organizational model, Commonweal apprentices experience the full scope of running a theatre company, thoroughly preparing them for life as theatre artists in a way unlike most other artistic apprenticeships.



holiday classic. The playwright, Mark Brown, also wrote Commonweal favorite *Around the World in 80 Days*, and just as when we produced that show, we were lucky enough to fly him in from Los Angeles to host a series of talkbacks for opening weekend! We played "20 Questions" with Mark when he was here (you can check out this and other awesome videos on our Facebook page) and he told us the inception of his holiday show:

I discovered, after 9/11, how—unfortunately with the tragedy—people were really, really nice to each other and the whole world seemed quite a lovely place to be... and then it went away. I was in New York and people weren't honking at each other, and then a few months later people were honking at each other, not holding the door open for people, and then I thought, Well, maybe that's how Ebenezer Scrooge feels.

Instead of only being generous around the holidays, we learned, in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*, the importance of maintaining the "spirit of Christmas" all year long.

Diving (not wading) into 2017!

January and February are traditionally a time for Commonweal Resident Company members to complete administrative tasks and tuck into cozy winter life in Lanesboro. Last January, however, we hit the ground running when we welcomed the Smithsonian's *Water/Ways* exhibit to our space! *Water/Ways* educated visitors by flowing through the many functions of water in our world. The exhibit streamlined our experience to point out how we may better take care of this invaluable resource. Members of the community, as well as several class groups, poured into our lobby and Events Hall exhibit spaces.



Brent Anderson of Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center described the exhibit: "The Smithsonian *Water/Ways* exhibit showcased eight Minnesota cities where water is a defining feature of the community. The traveling exhibit gave local residents an opportunity to share how water has affected their lives and their community. It also helped educate the public on the many ways water is vital to both them and the environment, and the challenges it faces in the state of Minnesota." Water you think of this? Pretty neat, huh?!

“In 2017 we hit the ground running.”



A page from the H₂O-10 program

In cooperation with this bubbly exhibit, Commonweal Resident Ensemble and the Apprentice class presented *Ripples of Reflections* and *H₂O 10-Minute Plays*. *Ripples of Reflections* kicked off the exhibit with staged readings of poignant and humorous water-related stories from Lanesboro residents. With *H₂O 10-Minute Plays*, we collected and performed original works by Commonweal staff and alumnae that in some way focused on water. These were especially fun because we were able to virtually reunite with and engage the talents of old colleagues and friends.

The stories varied and covered many genres. One play focused on frightened characters stranded in a hurricane, while another looked at life at a family lake house. One dystopian story dealt with water shortages, while another centered on a mysterious bar that served water as its only beverage.

We had only seven days to cast, rehearse and produce all six of these fabulous plays; it was a typhoon of activity and fun. Resident Company member Philip Muehe directed one of the plays and performed in another. He pointed out that, "You'd think a 10-minute play would be overly simple, but there is often so much meat to dig into." Indeed, the Smithsonian's exhibit and subsequent stories told in our space highlighted the universality of water as both a bringer of life and potential force of destruction, as an integral component of survival and yet something we often take for granted.



Hal Cropp accepting the MCN Award

Special Honors

2017 will always be a special year for us, as the Commonweal received the Excellence Award for Small Organization from the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, recognizing outstanding merit as an organization in a range of areas, including board governance, financial management, civic engagement, and programming excellence. Nothing can beat, however, the joy and fellowship we are able to share with our wonderful patrons. MDC member P.J. Thompson of Winona had this to say about her relationship with the Commonweal:

“If you’ve never felt like you were part of something, the minute you walk in the door you’ll feel like you’re part of something for the rest of your life.”

We really could not do what we do without the support, love and community of our Commonweal patrons. Thank you all so much!

The Apprenticeship Program

In March of 2017, the Commonweal apprentice class presented their capstone production, *I Am My Own Wife* by Doug Wright. This one-man show follows



Apprentice Megan Hanks in *When We Dead Awaken*

the true story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf who survived Nazi- and, later, Soviet-occupied East Berlin as a trans-woman. Over the course of the show, apprentice Lewis Youngren played Charlotte as well as over 30 other characters with whom Charlotte came in contact. It was a pleasure

to see Lewis flourish in such a challenging role, and a privilege to learn about Charlotte’s unique tale of

perseverance. In an interview with *The Writer* magazine, Wright expounds on the importance of this story: “Mostly, I’m compelled by outsiders; people who are marginalized in their own cultural moment, people who felt obligated to tell the truth when it wasn’t convenient.” Thanks for letting us share this story, Doug Wright.

Community Benefits

While the Commonweal is not “community theatre,” we do value our place as a “theatre of our community.” Your attendance and support through the years have encouraged us to select play titles for each season which not only align with the passions of the company, but also delight and challenge you, our patrons. We’re pretty sure no other theatre company in America had a line-up last year quite like ours—from Ibsen’s *When We Dead Awaken* to *Steel Magnolias* to *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*—and from the comments we get on our Facebook

[Continued on back panel]

Student Matinee series

This is the season for Yuletide cheer, festive decorations, and student matinees! *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* included eight student matinees, with a total of 1,168 students attending. Commonweal precedes student matinees with classroom workshops, so that students get to know cast members and better understand the story being told. Resident Ensemble members Elizabeth Dunn and David Hennessey worked together to coordinate the workshops, which were a great success. Students stepped into the shoes of lawyers and put Scrooge and the Ghosts of Christmas “on trial.” Some students went above and beyond the instructions, creating skits and funny characters to get their points across. It was fun all around for students, teachers, and Commonweal staff.

We’re grateful that F&M Community Bank continues to sponsor our student matinee series; it’s a wonderful way to make professional theatre accessible to young people in the region.



Elizabeth Dunn runs a student workshop

Finances & Needs—Moving the Commonweal Forward

As the sidebar at right indicates, serving more than 23,000 people through 214 performances was a monumental feat. And despite the artistic success and community-wide collaborations, 2017 presented significant challenges regarding the company's finances. The company faced a shortfall of \$56,000. While we strive to keep expenses as low as possible (just under \$869,000 last season), revenues fell short—under \$813,000.

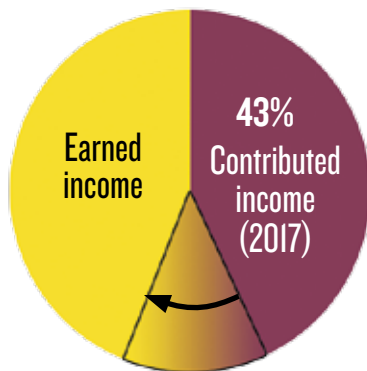
One of the major issues we face is reflected in the current income model. Industry-wide, theaters operate on a revenue mix of 51% earned¹ income and 49% contributed² income. Theaters in our budget category³ operate on an even greater contribution-heavy mix:

42% earned to 58% contributed

In 2017, the income mix at the Commonweal was

57% earned to 43% contributed

—the exact inverse of many theatres in our budget category. Simply getting closer to a typical 50:50 mix would have seen us end last season with about a \$4,000 surplus.



Goal: Increase contributed income by 7-13%

A second factor is a challenge most all theatre companies are facing—a continued decline in attendance. In 2017 we saw 19,467 patrons over 182 mainstage performances. This is down from 20,170 in 2016, and 22,113 in 2013—our highest attended season ever.

Fully two-thirds of our budget is spent on labor costs⁴. While this seems high, note that ensemble members earn an average of \$34,000 annually for full-time work. Seasonal artists earn \$250 per week. Apprentices receive a weekly stipend of \$50. Directors and designers receive fees which range

2017 Performance Stats

Smithsonian's Water/Ways	6 weeks	1,661 visitors
Ripples of Reflections	2 performances	131 patrons
H ₂ O 10-minute plays	3 perf's	91 patrons
IbsenFest	2 events	77 patrons
Last Two Minutes of... Ibsen	2 perf's	177 patrons
I Am My Own Wife	12 perf's	592 patrons
Student matinees	10 perf's	1,168 patrons
Main Stage 5 prod's	182 perf's	19,467 patrons
Arteria	3 perf's	155 patrons
TOTAL	214 perf's	23,297 people served
	39 artists employed	

from \$1,000 to \$3,000 per production. Though it may seem that cutting labor costs would be a solution, the reality is that all of these people are essential to producing the quality of work and maintaining the relationships to our extended family that we currently enjoy.

Facilities are also a huge portion of our expenses. The company owns two buildings—the theatre and an artists' residence—for which the annual costs of operating and maintaining are \$96,000, without accounting for depreciation.

With limited options available to us, our course has become clear. The company's Board of Directors, in concert with the staff, have agreed that the strategic direction of the Commonweal's success lies in two major areas of focus:

- ★ increasing the amount of contributed income to move us closer to the industry standard 50:50 income mix, and
- ★ increasing our penetration in key markets—those which lie within an hour's drive of the Commonweal.

If we are successful in these two initiatives, the Commonweal's future should be assured for generations to come. We can't do it without you.

1. Ticket sales
2. Donations, grants, sponsorships, etc.
3. \$500,000 - \$1,000,000
4. Over \$582,000

page, you truly value not only the quality of the work on stage, but the sense of connection you feel with company members from the moment they walk in the door.

We are proud to be a part of our region, and to serve as a cultural, educational, and economic asset to everyone who comes through our doors. Looking at our successes in 2017, we know that—

- ★ Nearly 70% of our audience came from within 60 miles of Lanesboro
- ★ 1,000 patrons attended special County Free and Senior Night performances
- ★ More than 1,100 area students took part in our Student Matinee Series
- ★ Overall, more than 20,000 patrons watched a show at the Commonweal last year!

For us, putting on a show at the Commonweal is about more than just having a fun two hours. We want our audiences to have as full an experience as possible, which is why we have study guides and enhancement videos for all our shows available online and in the lobby. MDC members are invited to Page-to-Stage events at the beginning of each rehearsal process to hear from directors and designers about their visions for the new show, and all audiences at our preview performances are welcomed to give feedback as part of the final phase of the rehearsal process.

Another source of inspiration and revitalization for the company is our Apprentice program. Launched in 2008, this experience invites three to five recent college graduates to immerse themselves



in the Commonweal’s distinctive artist/administrator structure and learn a viable model for a sustained career in the arts. Past apprentice company members have gone on to graduate school, followed careers in theatre administration, and more than a few have stayed on in Lanesboro like current resident company members Megan Pence, Philip Muehe, Elizabeth Dunn, and Abbie Cathcart.

Now, in our 30th season, we celebrate with you all the good work the Commonweal has been able to do—both on stage and off—and dream of what we can accomplish in the next thirty years. All that we do stands on the foundation of a passionate and generous family of donors, who see a good match between personally-held values and beliefs, and those held by the company. Whether your gift has been \$5 or \$5,000, you have made a difference. Thank you!

It Takes a Village

Theatre is a collaborative art form, not only in its creation but in its support as well. Making art costs money, and many organizations and people step up to the plate to make our art happen—including you!

To our granting organizations, our board of directors, our MDC members, our season pass holders, our volunteers and all our many individual donors:

Thank You!

Our 2017 Board of Directors:

- Charles Aug—*President*
- Alan Bailey
- Harold N. Cropp—*Ex Officio*
- Barb DeCramer—*Treasurer*
- Jill Frieders—*Secretary*
- Chris Hanson
- Ron Kreinbring
- Wendy Mattison
- Jeffery Mintz
- Sarah Peterson
- Jose Rivas
- Joan Ruen—*Vice President*
- Dave Schutz
- Pamela J. Thompson



And thank you to theatregoers like you—your patronage makes live theatre possible!